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LETTER TO A FRIEND COMING TO SAIGON -- (EXCERPTS)

From Daniel Ellsberg

April 1967

First, as you are well aware, you and your colleagues are not coming into a working system where everything is going along pretty well, where policies and organization are sound and functioning "as well as could be expected", "getting the job done" and serving US interests adequately, and where your only responsibility is to make the transition of office holders as smooth as possible. It might be going too far to say, rather, that you are coming into a bankrupt organization and set of policies; but there is no question at all that change, in many ways, is desperately needed and overdue. There is much to be said about the substantive changes in attitude and policy -- as well as personality and tactics -- but I won't try to say much about these in this letter -- which I hope to get off today. But, there are a couple of matters I would like to emphasize to you, personally.

ADD [One of the things that most needs changing -- and I have high hopes of your own ~~ability~~ to support this -- is the state of ignorance of VietNam and the nature of our problems here, that has managed to perpetuate itself over the years at the Mission Council level. A separate need is for the demonstration of leadership at the highest civilian levels in Saigon -- willingness to command, to intervene and influence in both military and Vietnamese affairs, to take over-all responsibility for our policies and programs in VietNam and to set an example of our work and dedication to our purposes here.

But, I wish to focus here upon ~~the~~ particular need for informed leadership -- a willingness on the part of the highest civilian levels to learn, to hear (and to pass on to Washington) unpleasant realities from the field. I would urge you, personally, to aim at being the best informed, most knowledgeable man in Saigon about problems and affairs, both in Saigon and the field; you have an excellent start on this already and, in fact, the only danger I would see is that you might well be struck by hubris as you look around the table at your colleagues and come to feel

that it was not urgent to get any further ahead of them in your grasp of Vietnamese realities. The ~~whole~~ truth is that it is not good enough -- not enough to avoid the worst kind of personal and national failure here -- just to know more than your past and current colleagues in Washington and Saigon (that is the kind of standard that the Vietnamese and MACV Advisors like to set for themselves; the ARVN 5th Division draws comfort from comparing itself to the ARVN 25th, never to the VC or to the demands of beating the VC).

do better?

(2) L... How can you achieve this? Some of the methods already have been used by you effectively: maintain multiple private channels of information and suggestions; talk privately -- do a lot of listening to knowledgeable subordinates, not relying exclusively upon formal reports through the chain of command or upon opinions expressed publicly in the presence of superiors. I would add W

a. Maximum use of field trips (neither Lodge, Porter, nor Bachram showed the willingness to practice field command or inspection in the manner of a Westmoreland or a Depuy, thus denying themselves many benefits of influence, inspiration and information). On these trips, you should take maximum opportunity for individual private talks, both with US field workers and with Vietnamese. Such trips will give you opportunity to provide inspiration and motivation to the field personnel. But, I believe that the very best way to accomplish this is by showing interest in hearing their views and concerns, followed by decisive action of your Saigon command post. A real problem here in the last year has been increasing demoralization of some of the ~~more~~ experienced and dedicated Americans, resulting from their feeling that no superior was interested in hearing their views and warnings. Even some of the best of these superiors seemed almost constitutionally unable to listen to them, and were specifically inaccessible to subordinates. As a result, they were slow learners and US interests suffered, along with the morale and motivations of their experienced subordinates.

It is fine to encourage people -- as I take it from comments on your last two visits you have felt prone to do so -- but the strongest encouragement you can ~~get~~ ^{PRIVATE} is the spectacle of a superior who is not cast in the same mold of imperviousness to information and, specifically, to unpleasant information and to heretical advice.

b. Vietnamese. You should aim to have much more ~~real~~ ^{PRIVATE}, informal, direct contact with a variety of Vietnamese informants, both governmental and public, than past members of the Mission Council have done. Our whole machinery over

here, in fact, suffers from inadequate contact with Vietnamese. But you should not, in any case, rely wholly on the subordinate machinery to provide your inputs from Vietnamese.

c. Among Americans, it is the ones with the longest experience in VietNam and related situations that can give you the most useful insights and ~~most~~ of these, at any given time, are outside the governmental bureaucracy: This includes, in particular, some representative newsmen (like Sol Sanders, of US News and World Report, Bob Shapley and Takasha Oka), along with researchers and academics like Jerry Hickey, of Rand. Most such people comment that they have close to no contact with US officials and their long background is in no way exploited by the Mission. (A man like Sol Sanders -- who has worked for 20 years in this area -- has contacts among the Vietnamese that are far broader and more intimate than any member of the Mission, and his ability to size up a political crisis quickly on the basis of these contacts, and his long continuous experience, can often, I suspect, out-pace any agency, or the Mission as a whole -- this is a resource which he and the few others like him would be glad to put at the disposal of the Mission, for patriotic motives and on a confidential basis -- if anyone had ever asked them).

d. OCO and the pacification process can benefit from much more input from the political section, OSA and military J-2 agencies than it has been getting; there should be more liaison with these agencies and more tasking of them for research, comments or specific data in the pacification area (the lending of members of the Political Section to the Regions is a good step in this direction).

e. The Monthly Special Joint Reports from the Province Teams are the most objective and comprehensive source of information of all the current problems and conditions in the countryside and they deserve your personal attention (the common belief among Province Team members that these reports were being read personally by the Deputy Ambassador was a great morale builder and contributed strongly to the honesty and informativeness of this reporting; the belief was incorrect, but it should not have been and I didn't disabuse anyone). The devices of acquiring joint signatures and of by-passing intermediate layers of command (except for information purposes) have proved to be very effective in achieving honest relevant reporting and should be extended to other areas; for instance, to report from the Division level and, perhaps, to more joint Vietnamese/US reporting.

You should also look personally -- at least a skim -- at the MACV SAMEs (Senior Advisors Monthly Evaluation), which MACV has been extremely chary about, showing to any civilians, perhaps because they get an honest picture at the advisory level.

ADD 2

f. You should make a strong effort to inform yourself about the past and, specifically, about the roots in the recent past, of ongoing programs and policies. It is impossible to interpret Vietnamese reactions to some of these policies and programs, or to understand why they are failing, without knowing the bureaucratic history of their origin: something that the Vietnamese are likely to know much better than the American newcomers. These are the matters of bureaucratic history, not to be found in books and newspapers.

To avoid the myriad of errors and false starts that 'come from the almost universal American trait of acting as if' history had started the day one arrived on the scene, it should be well worthwhile to commission some quick, ~~competent~~ case histories of programs and policies, whose effects are still being felt in the current situation; for instance, the strategic hamlets program; the Buddhist struggle movements; Hop Tac and the National Priority Area; the PATS and RD Cadre; FULRO and the Montagnards; coups -- abortive and successful -- since November of 1960; and the Vietnamese view of the US role in these. Such studies -- which, I reiterate, you need personally -- might be the work of a research section within OCO, which is needed for other purposes as well. A first quick cut -- and I think a most valuable one -- to these matters could be based upon the memories of individuals who had personal contact with the programs or events and who still remain in Vietnam (in some cases, not for much longer).

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In addition to absorbing information from all of these sources, you should do something that no other high level American administrator connected with Vietnam has ever done, to discourage the bureaucratic ~~program~~ that poison this flow of information. You should take stringent steps to punish lying, evasion and the concealing of information. You should make no apologies whatever for exploiting to the fullest ~~informal~~ channels of information, to check official reporting, bypassing layers of command and utilizing special representatives as fact-finders; responding in a harsh and discouraging way to every instance, military and civilian, of (a) lying to you and the President and (b) encouraging or ~~acquiring~~ subordinates to lie to you and the President.

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In sum, while I strongly feel it is urgent that the new team, before long, inaugurate marked substantive changes, both in policy (in particular, in the sphere of Vietnamese politics and national leadership) and in tactics (in particular, our relationship with the Vietnamese Government and armed forces), I suggest that the initial focus of the new team should be not so much "What should we do?" but "What should we look into, learn, re-examine?" and, Beyond the initial phase, ~~you~~ should be restructuring the information system, the local capabilities for research, analysis and reporting, to assure both you and Washington a better education on fundamentals and a better warning system on current problems than either the

Mission or the President has ever enjoyed in the past, (a specific task, which should be started soon, is a comprehensive examination of the adequacy of all the local "finding-out" agencies and resources: the Political Section, JUSPAO, OCO field teams, OSA in Saigon and in the field, J-2 and all military intelligence agencies, MACV Advisory, Reporting, Rand and other research efforts. More coordination would probably be useful, both in the direction of the collection effort and, even more, in analysis and dissemination; but, I suspect that even more dramatic inadequacies will show up in the individual agency efforts, themselves and in gaps uncovered by any agency).